

Officials Build Cross-Border Interoperability

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Officials from the United States and Canada are improving cross-border interoperability by sharing information and forming partnerships. At the fourth annual Western Border Interoperability Working Group (WBIWG) meeting in Lethbridge, Alberta, in April, initial plans were made to launch a Web site where articles and documents could be shared with participants to facilitate more dialogue throughout the year. "The working group allows people to connect. There are no barriers when people work together," said Bill Meade, executive director and special projects solicitor general for public security in Alberta, Canada. "So far, I'm encouraged by our progress. I've seen, and think we'll continue to see, nothing but positives. The collaboration enables us to learn from each other so all of our citizens, on both sides of the border, are protected."

The purpose of the WBIWG is to provide a platform for federal, state and provincial coordination of public-safety communications and technologies with an emphasis on border areas. WBIWG first met in February 2005 to discuss radio interoperability issues and begin coordination among local, state, federal and international public-safety agencies along the Montana and Canadian border. At the meeting, plans for restructuring Alberta's comprehensive provincewide public-safety communications system were released. At the same time, Montana's plans for developing its Interoperability Montana (IM) project, a statewide trunked public-safety communications system plan funded in large part by Department of Homeland Security (DHS) grants, were also shared.

The state of Montana's Public Safety Services Bureau (PSSB) has been a major player in the WBIWG, according to Christopher Lewis, public-safety communications program manager in the National Radio and Spectrum Program Management Office for the Department of the Interior (DOI). DOI employees have been working with Montana officials and are involved in the WBIWG to improve interoperability. The state of Montana has more than 550 miles of border with three provinces of Canada — Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan — with 14 border crossings and ports of entry.

“Montana is the fourth-largest state in the nation, but has a low population,” said Chris Christensen, chief of the PSSB. “We have a lot of land to cover with a communications system, but we can’t afford it on our own. The working group helps us to obtain federal money, which we’re starting to see thanks to our partnerships across the border and with the DOI.” DOI officials provide support to the PSSB by sharing their spectrum and towers now to have access to the system once it’s built and running.

Lewis said that by supporting the western states in their efforts to improve interoperability, the DOI is making interoperability more than a buzz word; it’s a reality. “DOI is leading the way in interoperability. We’re working with federal, state and local governments to get it done,” Lewis said.

It’s important for Montana to be familiar with the technology that Alberta is deploying in its public-safety communications radio system and vice versa so that at some point in the future switching devices could facilitate integration, Christensen said. “Technology is easy; the hard part is getting people together to build the partnerships necessary to get the border area covered,” he said. For example, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police of the Province of Alberta has offered a future demonstration to the IM northern tier technical committee of its interoperable component gateway device that temporarily patches radios in different frequency ranges. This would facilitate connectivity between Canadian and U.S. law-enforcement partners. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has obtained three gateways to be staged in the Great Falls, Havre and Whitefish areas in Montana.

Since the group’s first meeting, members have continued dialogue and expanded coordination and membership. Public-safety officials in both Idaho and North Dakota plan to join the WBIWG, Christensen said. The group has also opened international channels of communications, which is crucial when action needs to be taken quickly to solve crimes and prosecute criminals, Meade said. For example, shortly before an American child pornographer in custody at the Canadian border was to be released, members of the integrated child exploitation (ICE) unit in Alberta notified Betsy Horsman, assistant U.S. attorney in Helena, Mont., so that the pornographer could be appropriately retained and prosecuted in the United States. The border, although an important boundary, is just a line. Natural disasters and criminals don’t respect the border. “They cross over, and it takes public safety from both sides to fight it,” Meade said.

For more information on public-safety communications in Montana see “Montana’s PSAP Success” on Page 52 in the June issue of *MissionCritical Communications*.